



Legislative Summary

The “Closing the Health Care Gap Act”, introduced by Senators Frist and Landrieu, will build on successful legislation authored by Senator Frist and others to take the next bold and necessary step to reduce and eliminate health care disparities. If enacted this legislation will be the most comprehensive national initiative to address disparities in health care access and quality. The legislation will address five key areas necessary to close the health disparity gap in America.

Elements of the Program

1. Improved Health Care Quality and Data Efforts

While all federal health programs currently measure quality performance, different agencies measure health care differently. This section of the legislation will take steps to ensure that when federal health programs measure health quality, they do so in a uniform manner. By putting the federal quality efforts on “the same page”, the federal health programs will be able to improve the safety, timeliness, effectiveness, patient-centeredness, efficiency, and equitability of health care delivered. This, in coordination with other new data collection efforts, will allow for a clear understanding of disparities in care, along with benchmarks to evaluate progress towards reducing disparities.

2. Expanded Access to Quality Health Care

This section of the legislation will fund a number of initiatives to improve access to health care services and increase awareness of the importance of reducing health care disparities through strengthened outreach and education.

- Access and Awareness Grants. The legislation will establish a health care access and promotion grant program to provide disparity populations with greater access to and awareness of available health care services and community resources. Eligible grantees will include faith-based institutions, community health centers, and other entities or consortia able to provide a broad range of priority services. Programs eligible for grant funding will focus on building community infrastructure that promotes effective healthcare coordination and management. The bill emphasizes programs that offer the opportunity for ongoing community involvement and support. This bill anticipates strong performance and outcome evaluations to ensure that these programs are achieving results. These programs will concentrate efforts in four overarching areas:
 - Providing resources and guidance to individuals regarding health insurance coverage, including information on how to obtain health coverage in the private

insurance market, through state and federal programs, and through other available coverage options.

- Providing patient navigator services to help individuals work through the health system to obtain appropriate quality care and thus better utilize their health coverage.
 - Promoting broad health awareness and prevention efforts, including patient education programs to help increase patients' knowledge of how to best participate in treatment decisions.
 - Enhancing preventive services and coordinated, multidisciplinary disease management of chronic illnesses.
- Innovative Outreach Programs. Funds will be available for other uses as determined appropriate by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, including innovative Medicaid/SCHIP outreach efforts, and interventions to target and reduce behavioral risk factors.

3. Strong National Leadership, Cooperation, and Coordination

- Office of Minority Health. This section of the legislation would formally authorize the Office of Minority Health at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and expand the mission of the office to help provide greater leadership across and throughout the Department, as well as with other federal government agencies. The responsibilities of the office would include:
 - Working with HHS agencies and with the Surgeon General of the United States to establish a strategic plan to address health disparities.
 - Establish specific short and long-term goals for addressing health disparities, with a particular focus on health promotion, disease prevention, chronic care and research.
 - Increase awareness of disparities among health care providers, health plans, and the public.
 - Coordinate the classification and collection of health care data to allow for the ongoing assessment of disparities and monitoring of progress towards their elimination.
 - Work with federal agencies and departments outside of HHS, for example in the areas of education and housing, to maximize program resources available to reduce and eliminate disparities.
 - Fund a national minority health resource center to serve as a national resource and referral service on minority health issues.

4. Professional Education, Awareness, and Training

This portion of the legislation would build upon and enhance a series of existing programs designed to increase the diversity and cultural sensitivity of the nation's health care workforce.

- Workforce Diversity and Training. Reauthorize the federal Health Professionals Program under Title VII of the Public Health Service Act and increase the level of federal support

for the components of that program designed to increase the diversity of health professionals and the number of minority health professionals serving communities throughout the United States. These programs are critical to (1) help health professions institutions increase the number of underrepresented minority students and faculty to achieve a culturally competent workforce, (2) increase diversity in the health professions workforce by providing funds for scholarships targeted at financially needy students from disadvantaged background (many of whom are underrepresented minorities), and (3) increase the number of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds entering and graduating from health professions in order to increase diversity in the health professions workforce affecting improved access to health care.

- Increased Flexibility for Historically Black Graduate Institutions. Provide increased flexibility in the use of Higher Education Act funds for Historically Black Graduate Institutions.
- Model Cultural Competency Curriculum Development. Studies have shown that there often is a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity among health professionals which can act as a barrier to quality health care services. Cultural competence generally is defined as the provision of health care services and training in the cultural context and language that is most appropriate for those individuals receiving the service or training. The legislation will authorize a series of demonstration projects to test model curricula and identify additional barriers to culturally appropriate care. The bill also envisions a robust, online library with searchable, clinically relevant cultural information for medical providers to have on hand in the practice setting.

5. Enhanced Research

This portion of the legislation will encourage expanded research to identify sources of racial and ethnic disparities and assess promising intervention strategies. It would also promote research on ethical issues and other barriers to eliminating disparities. Research would be conducted under the auspices of various federal agencies, including the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the National Institutes of Health.

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The legislation would expand research at AHRQ to identify or develop and evaluate effective strategies that will assist providers in closing the gap between what is known and what is done in health care for minority health disparity populations and to ensure research is readily disseminated and incorporated into practice.
- National Institutes of Health. Building on the Frist-Kennedy “Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act of 2000,” the legislation also would expand research at NIH into the sources of health disparities, and increase efforts to recruit minority scientists and research professionals into the field of health disparity research.